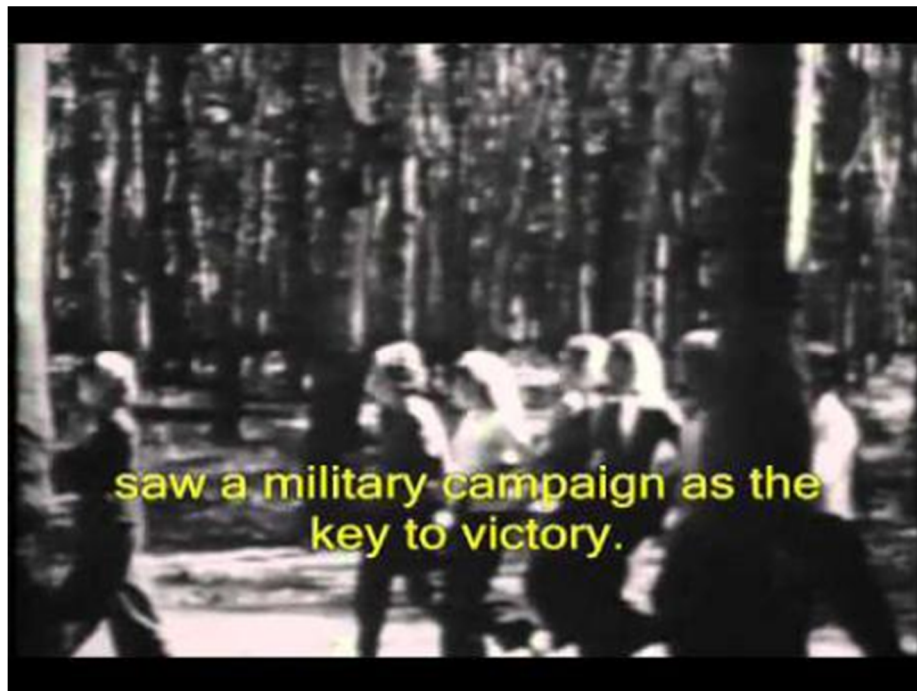


Nationalism and socialism - Paul Mattick



Mattick writes on nationalism, from 'American Socialist', vol. 6, Sept. 1959, No. 9, pp.16-19.

NATIONS, whether “knitted together” by ideology, by objective conditions, or by the usual combination of both, are products of social development. There is no more point in cherishing or damning nationalism in principle than in cherishing or damning tribalism or, for that matter, an ideal cosmopolitanism. The nation is a fact to be suffered or enjoyed, to be fought for or against according to historical circumstances and the implications of those circumstances for various populations and different classes within these populations.

The modern nation-state is both a product and a condition of capitalist development. Capitalism tends to destroy traditions and national peculiarities by spreading its mode of production all over the world. But though capital production controls world production and though the “true” capitalist market is the world market, capitalism arose in some nations sooner than in others, found more favorable conditions here than there and was more successful in one than in another place, and thus combined special capital interests with particular national needs.

“Progressive nations” of the last century were those with a rapid capital development; “reactionary nations” were those in which social relationships hindered the unfolding of the capitalist mode of production. Because the “next future” belonged to capitalism and because capitalism is the precondition for socialism, non-utopian socialists favored capitalism as against older social production relations and welcomed nationalism in so far as it served to hasten capitalist development. Though reluctant to admit this, they were not disinclined to accept capitalist imperialism as a way of breaking the stagnation and backwardness of non-capitalist areas from without, and thus to direct their development into “progressive” channels. They also favored the disappearance of small nations unable to develop large-scale economies, and their incorporation into larger national entities capable of capitalist

development. They would, however, side with small “progressive nations” as against larger reactionary countries and, when suppressed by the latter, would support the formers’ national liberation movements. At all times and on all occasions, however, nationalism was not a socialist goal but was accepted as a mere instrument of social advancement which, in turn, would come to its end in the internationalism of socialism. Western capitalism was the “capitalist world” of the last century. National issues were concerned with the unification of countries such as Germany and Italy, with the liberation of such oppressed nations as Ireland, Poland, Hungary, Greece, and with the consolidation of such “synthetic” nations as the United States. This was also the “world” of socialism; a small world indeed viewed from the twentieth century. While national questions that agitated the socialist movement in the middle of the nineteenth century had either been resolved, or were in the process of being resolved, and, in any case, had ceased to be of real importance to Western socialism, the world-wide revolutionary movement of the twentieth century opened the question of nationalism anew. Is this new nationalism, which sheds Western dominance and institutes capitalist production relations and modern industry in hitherto under-developed areas, still a “progressive” force as was the nationalism of old? Do these national aspirations coincide in some manner with those of socialism? Do they hasten the end of capitalism by weakening Western imperialism or do they inject new life into capitalism by extending its mode of production all over the globe?

THE position of nineteenth-century socialism on the question of nationalism involved more than preferring capitalism to more static social systems. Socialists operated within bourgeois-democratic revolutions which were also nationalist; they supported national liberation movements of oppressed people because they promised to take on bourgeois-democratic features, because in socialist eyes these national-bourgeois-democratic revolutions were no longer strictly capitalist revolutions. They could be utilized if not for the installation of socialism itself, then for furthering the growth of socialist movements and for bringing about conditions more favorable to the latter.

Imperialism, however, not nationalism, was the great issue around the turn of the century. German “national” interests were now imperialist interests competing with the imperialisms of other countries. France’s “national” interests were those of the French empire, as Britain’s were those of the British empire. Control of the world and the division of this control between the great imperialist powers determined “national” policies. “National” wars were imperialist wars, culminating in world-wide wars.

It has often been pointed out that the Russian situation at the beginning of the twentieth century was in many respects similar to the revolutionary state of West Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century. The positive attitude towards national-bourgeois revolutions on the part of the early socialists was based on the hope, if not the conviction, that the proletarian element within these revolutions might go beyond the restricted goals of the bourgeoisie. In Lenin’s view, the Russian bourgeoisie was no longer able to carry through its own democratic revolution and thus the working class was destined to bring about the “bourgeois” and the “proletarian” revolutions in a series of social changes that constituted a “revolution in permanence.” In a way, the new situation seemed to repeat, on a more grandiose scale, the revolutionary situation of 1848. Instead of the earlier limited and temporary alliances of bourgeois-democratic movements with proletarian internationalism, there now existed a world-wide amalgam of revolutionary forces both of a social and nationalist character which might be driven beyond their restricted goals in pursuit of proletarian ends.

Consistent international socialism as represented, for instance, by Rosa Luxemburg, opposed Bolshevik “national self-determination.” For her, the existence of independent national governments did not alter the fact of their control by imperialist powers through the latter’s control of world economy. Imperialist capitalism could neither be fought nor weakened through the creation of new nations but only by opposing capitalist supra-nationalism with proletarian internationalism. Of course, proletarian internationalism cannot prevent, nor has it reason to prevent, movements for national liberation from imperialist rule. These movements are part of capitalist society just as is imperialism. But “utilizing” these national movements for socialist ends, could only mean depriving them of their nationalist character and turning them into socialist, internationally-oriented movements.

THE first World War produced the Russian Revolution and, whatever its original intentions, it was and remained a national revolution. Although expecting help from abroad, it never extended help to outside revolutionary forces, except where such help was dictated by Russian national interests. The second World War and its aftermath brought independence to India and Pakistan, the Chinese Revolution, the liberation of Southeast Asia, and self-determination for some nations in Africa and the Middle East. At first glance, this “renaissance” of nationalism contradicts both Rosa Luxemburg’s and Lenin’s positions on the “national question.” Apparently, the time for national emancipation has not come to an end, and obviously, the rising tide of anti-imperialism does not serve world-revolutionary socialist ends.

Actually, what this new nationalism indicates are some structural changes in capitalist world economy and the end of nineteenth-century colonialism. The “white man’s burden” has become an actual burden instead of a blessing. The returns from colonial rule are dwindling while the costs of empire are rising. To be sure, individuals, corporations, and even governments, still enrich themselves by colonial exploitation. But, this is now due to special conditions – control of concentrated oil-resources, discovery of large uranium deposits, etc. – rather than the general ability to operate profitably in colonies and other dependent countries. What were once exceptional profit-rates now drop to the “normal” rate. Where they remain exceptional, it is in most cases due to a hidden form of government subsidy. Generally speaking, colonialism no longer pays, so that it is in part the principle of profitability itself which calls forth a new approach to imperialist rule.

Two world wars destroyed the old imperialist powers more or less. But this is not the end of imperialism, which, though it evolves new forms and expressions, still spells economic and political control of weaker by stronger nations. Imperialism by indirection appears more promising than nineteenth-century colonialism or its belated revival in Russia’s satellite policies. Of course, the one does not exclude the other, as when real or imaginary strategic considerations require actual occupation, such as U.S. control of Okinawa and British military rule in Cyprus. But generally, indirect control may be superior to direct control, as the system of wage labor proved superior to slave labor. Apart from the Western hemisphere, America has not been an imperialist power in the traditional sense. Even here it gained the benefits of imperial control more by “dollar-diplomacy” than by direct military intervention. As the strongest capitalist power, America may well expect to dominate in somewhat similar fashion the world’s non-Soviet regions.

NONE of the European nations is actually able to prevent the complete dissolution of its imperial rule except with America’s help. But this help subjects these nations as well as their foreign possessions to American penetration and control. In falling “heir” to what is left of

the declining imperialism, the United States has no urgent need to rush to the defense of West European imperialism, except where such defense frustrates the Eastern power bloc. "Anti-colonialism" is not an American policy deliberately designed to weaken her Western allies – though it does so in fact – but is adopted in the belief that it will strengthen the "free world." This comprehensive outlook, to be sure, includes numerous narrower special interests which give America's "anti-imperialism" its hypocritical character and leads to the belief that by opposing the imperialism of other nations, America merely fosters her own. Deprived of imperialist potentialities, Germany, Italy, and Japan no longer have an independent policy. The progressive decline of the French and British Empires reduces these nations to secondary powers. At the same time, the national aspirations of less developed and weaker countries cannot be realized except as they fit into the power schemes of the dominating imperialist nations. Though Russia and the United States share world supremacy for the time being, lesser nations attempt, nevertheless, to assert their specific interests and to some degree affect the policies of the super powers. The enmities and international contradictions of the two great rivals also grant newly arising nations, as China and India, a degree of independence they would not otherwise possess. Under the guise of "neutrality," a small nation like Yugoslavia, for instance, is even permitted to depart from one power bloc and return to the other. The independent but weaker countries can assert their independence – such as it is – only because of the larger conflict between Russia and the United States.

THE erosion of Western imperialism, it is said, creates a power vacuum in hitherto controlled areas of the world. If the vacuum is not filled by the West, it will be by Russia. Of course, neither the representatives of the "new nationalism" nor those of the "old imperialism" understand this kind of talk; since the former displaces the latter, no vacuum arises. What is meant, then, by "vacuum" is that "national self-determination" of underdeveloped countries leaves them open to internal and external "communist aggression," unless the West guarantees their "independence." In other words, national self-determination does not include a free choice of allies, although it does at times include preference with respect to "protecting" Western powers. "Independence" of Tunisia and Morocco, for instance, is all right so long as independence from France implies allegiance not to Russia but loyalty to the American-dominated Western power-bloc.

To the extent that it can still assert itself in the two-power-bloc world, national self-determination is an expression of the "cold war," of the political-military stalemate. But the developmental trend does not point to a world of many nations, each independent and secure, but to the further disintegration of weaker nations, i.e. to their "integration" in either one or the other power bloc. Of course, the struggle for national emancipation within the setting of imperialist rivalries allows some countries to exploit the power competition between East and West. But this very fact points to the limitations of their national aspirations, as either agreement or war between the East and West would end their ability to maneuver between the two power centers. Meanwhile, Russia, which does not hesitate to destroy any attempt at real national self-determination in countries under her direct control, is ready to support national self-determination wherever it is directed against Western domination. Likewise, America, demanding self-determination for Russia's satellites, has no hesitancy in practicing in the Middle East what she abhors in Eastern Europe. Despite national revolution and self-determination, the time for national emancipation is practically over. These nations may retain their newly won independence, yet their formal independence does not release them from Western economic and political rule. They can escape this overlordship only by accepting that of Russia within the Eastern power-bloc.

NATIONAL revolutions in capitalistically retarded countries are attempts at modernization through industrialization whether they merely express opposition to foreign capital or are determined to change existing social relations. But whereas the nationalism of the nineteenth century was an instrument of private capital development, the nationalism of the twentieth century is predominately an instrument of state-capitalist development. And whereas the nationalism of the last century expanded the free world market and that degree of economic interdependency possible under private capital formation, present-day nationalism disrupts still further an already disintegrating world market and destroys that degree of “automatic” international integration provided by the free market mechanism.

Behind the nationalist drive is, of course, the pressure of poverty, which is growing more explosive as the discrepancy between poor and rich nations increases. The international division of labor as determined by private capital formation implied the exploitation of poorer by richer countries and the concentration of capital in the advanced capitalist nations. The new nationalism opposes the market determined concentration of capital so as to assure the further industrialization of the underdeveloped countries. Under present conditions, however, nationally organized capital production increases its disorganization on a worldwide scale. Private enterprise and government control operate now simultaneously in each capitalist country and also in the world at large. Side by side, there exist, then, the most ruthless general competition, the subordination of private to national competition, the most ruthless national competition, and the subordination of national competition to the supra-national requirements of power-bloc politics.

At the base of the current national aspirations and imperialist rivalries lies the actual need for world-wide organization of production and distribution beneficial to humanity as a whole. First, as the geologist K. F. Mather has pointed out, because “the earth is far better adapted for occupation by men organized on a world-wide scale, with maximum opportunity for free exchange of raw materials and finished products the world around, than by men who insist upon building barriers between regions even so inclusive as a large nation or an entire continent.” Second, because social production can be fully developed and can free human society from want and misery only by international cooperation without regard to particularistic national interests. The compelling interdependency implied in further progressive industrial development if not accepted and utilized for Human ends, asserts itself as a never-ending struggle between nations and for imperialist control.

The inability to achieve on an international scale what has been achieved, or is in the process of being achieved, on the national level partial or complete elimination of capital competition permits the continuation of class antagonisms in all countries despite the elimination or restriction of private capital formation. To state it the other way around: because nationalization of capital leaves class relations intact, there is no way of escaping competition on the international scene. Just as control over the means of production assures the maintenance of class divisions, so does control over the national state, which includes control over its means of production. The defense of the nation and its growing strength becomes the defense and reproduction of new ruling groups. The “love for the socialist fatherland” in Communist countries, the desire for a “stake in the country,” as exemplified in the existence of “socialist” governments in welfare-economies, as well as national self-determination in hitherto dominated countries, signifies the existence and rise of new ruling classes bound to the existence of the national state.

WHILE a positive attitude toward nationalism betrays a lack of interest in socialism, the socialist position on nationalism is obviously ineffective in countries fighting for national existence as well as in those countries oppressing other nations. If only by default, a consistent anti-nationalist position seems to support imperialism. However, imperialism functions for reasons of its own, quite independently of socialist attitudes toward nationalism. Furthermore, socialists are not required for the launching of struggles for national autonomy as the various “liberation” movements in the wake of the second World War have shown. Contrary to earlier expectations, nationalism could not be utilized to further socialist aims, nor was it a successful strategy to hasten the demise of capitalism. On the contrary, nationalism destroyed socialism by using it for nationalist ends.

It is not the function of socialism to support nationalism, even though the latter battles imperialism. But to fight imperialism without simultaneously discouraging nationalism means to fight some imperialists and to support others, for nationalism is necessarily imperialist or illusory. To support Arab nationalism is to oppose Jewish nationalism, and to support the latter is to fight the former, for it is not possible to support nationalism without also supporting national rivalries, imperialism, and war. To be a good Indian nationalist is to combat Pakistan; to be a true Pakistani is to despise India. Both these newly “liberated” nations are readying themselves to fight over disputed territory and subject their development to the double distortion of capitalist war economies.

And so it goes on: the “liberation” of Cyprus from British rule only tends to open a new struggle for Cyprus between Greeks and Turks and does not lift Western control from either Turkey or Greece. Poland’s “liberation” from Russian rule may well spell war with Germany for the “liberation” of German provinces now ruled by Poland and this, again, to new Polish struggles for the “liberation” of territory lost to Germany. Real national independence of Czechoslovakia would, no doubt, reopen the fight for the Sudetenland and this, in turn, the struggle for Czechoslovakia’s independence and perhaps for that of the Slovaks from the Czechs. With whom to side? With the Algerians against the French? With the Jews? With the Arabs? With both? Where shall the Jews *go to* make room for the Arabs? What shall the Arab refugees do to cease being a “nuisance” to the Jews? What to do with a million French “colons” who face, when Algerian liberation is accomplished, expropriation and expulsion? Such questions can be raised with reference to every part of the world, and will generally be answered by Jews siding with Jews, Arabs with Arabs, Algerians with Algerians, French with French, Poles with Poles and so forth – and thus they will remain unanswered and unanswerable. However Utopian the quest for international solidarity may appear in this melee of national and imperialist antagonisms, no other road seems open to escape fratricidal struggles and to attain a rational world society.

ALTHOUGH socialists sympathies are with the oppressed, they relate not to emerging nationalism but to the particular plight of twice-oppressed people who face both a native and foreign ruling class. Their national aspirations are in part “socialist” aspirations, as they include the illusory hope of impoverished populations that they can improve their conditions through national independence. Yet national self-determination has not emancipated the laboring classes in the advanced nations. It will not do so now in Asia and Africa. National revolutions, as in Algeria for instance, promise little for the lower classes save indulging on more equal terms in national prejudices. No doubt, this means something to the Algerians, who have suffered from a particularly arrogant colonial system. But the possible results of Algerian independence are deducible from those in Tunisia and Morocco, where existing

social relations have not been changed and the conditions of the exploited classes have not improved to any significant extent.

Unless socialism is altogether a mirage, it will rise again as an international movement or not at all. In any case, and on the basis of past experience, those interested in the rebirth of socialism must stress its internationalism most of all. While it is impossible for a socialist to become a nationalist, he is nevertheless an anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist. However, his fight against colonialism does not imply adherence to the principle of national self-determination, but expresses his desire for a non-exploitative, international socialist society. While socialists cannot identify themselves with national struggles, they can as socialists oppose both nationalism and imperialism. For example, it is not the function of French socialists to fight for Algerian independence but to turn France into a socialist society. And though struggles to this end would undoubtedly aid the liberation movement in Algeria and elsewhere, this would be a by-product of and not the reason for the socialist fight against nationalist imperialism. At the next stage, Algeria would have to be “de-nationalized” and integrated into an international socialist world.